

# HAGIA SOPHIA: God's Gift to the World

On December 27, 537 AD, three years before Justinian's death, the great Church of St. Sophia—designed by Master Architects Isidore of Miletus and Athemius of Tralles under the jurisdiction and leadership of Emperor Justinian—was dedicated. It is said, that during the dedication, Justinian murmured, "Solomon, I have surpassed thee."

by Steven P. Papadatos

Having a set of rare as-built drawings of St. Sophia that were produced by Dunbar & Oaks, one could spend hours looking over these spectacular documents and wonder the extent of genius that existed to construct this marvel of Orthodoxy. When studying the measured Architectural and Structural Drawings one comes to the conclusion that God must have orchestrated and inspired the design, since man alone could not have accomplished this great feat.

The interior of St. Sophia's mystical three-dimensional space, complemented with sunlight streaming through the 40 dome windows above the gigantic but yet graceful pendentives, creates a wonderful play of light with each moment of the day, as the sun moves from east to west. The entire structure appears to be alive. Nothing impedes or causes any negative shadow. Perhaps it was intentional that all other buildings Justinian built were not of this fine quality and proportions.

Ironically, the Church of St. Sophia does not face due East as tradition dictates, but the Altar faces exactly southeast. There are three logical thoughts behind the direction of St. Sophia. First, it captures the most effective sunlight during the entire day due to longitude and latitude. It is also based on summer and winter solstice. If this were intended, the direction is brilliant. During the early morning hours the sun sits directly over the Altar Area. Through the windows in the Apse below the Platytera, the Altar is illuminated as is the entire Nave Area and back wall separating the Nave from the Narthex. During the entire day, whether the sun is high or low, the entire Nave and Northeast Wall are brightly lit. In the late afternoon and towards the early evening, the sun enters through the rear dome windows, highlighting the altar with its gentle warmth. One could only imagine a late evening vesper service.

The second reason for the orientation is that the site dictates the southeast direction in order to create true symmetry in the site planning.

Finally, there is the practical possibility that the architects wanted to offer the finest of views from the heavily traveled Marmara Sea. Who wouldn't want to offer this site of beauty to the world?

Since the exterior of St. Sophia is muted, it would have been difficult to imagine the internal richness it possessed. It typifies Byzantine Architecture. It is quiet and humble on the exterior and vibrant and exquisite on the interior. The form of the exterior, although dominating the skyline, could be classified as a modern form of architecture because of its extreme simplicity.

When approaching St. Sophia, one walks through two Narthexes, the outer (Exo-Narthex) and the Main Narthex. The original plan of St. Sophia included a large atrium on the outside of the



Exo-Narthex which has since been destroyed. When entering through the Nave, one experiences a breathtaking view of a square plan of 56,419 square feet with marble Colonnades reaching up to the arches and embracing the strong horizontal galleries with column capitals carved as fine lacework of scrolls and other patterns surrounding Imperial Monograms and Crosses.

Even though it is widely speculated that these columns were looted from various temples, it does not appear plausible. The structure with its proportions was designed to accommodate a specific column dimension, rather than the columns to having dictated the proportions of St. Sophia. The capitals of the columns have all been carved specifically for St. Sophia, and do not indicate otherwise. It has also been speculated that the marble cladding of the walls were removed from other temples.

This is certainly not an accurate statement. Perhaps this could be true for some minor repair work over the course of time.

The brightness and splendor of the interior of St. Sophia was made possible with gold mosaics covering the dome and arches together with the bright colored marble covering the interior of the structure. As the sun from the dome windows scans the interior, the interior reflects like diamonds, and the lacework carvings create another dimension within the total space. Even though 361 doors have been counted throughout St. Sophia, it is said that a total of 365 doors were originally designed and installed throughout the entire building to represent the 365 days of the year. Nine doors were placed from the inner Narthex leading into the Nave, to allegedly represent the nine angles. The central door, being the highest, was reserved for processions and ceremonial use. The Nave is a representation of a ship by tradition, and at St. Sophia the Nave is clad with white marble with the marble's wavy blue veins representing the sea. Knowing this fact, one understands the significance of each detail and

the intent of the overall design.

Herbert J. Muller, who in 1940 was involved in surveying the existing conditions of St. Sophia, described St. Sophia saying, "What, then, does St. Sophia have to tell us? St. Sophia remains an inspiring monument, glorious and vainglorious. It is a symbol of humility and pride, of holiness and worldliness, as the power of faith. It is an everlasting triumph of a society. It may epitomize all the great societies and golden ages of the past, which still inspire."

What makes St. Sophia so very special? It was a new idea. It was a new way to build. It represented new ways to use space and it was truly innovative in approach to architecture and engineering. Even though, the dome collapsed twice during construction, revisions to the plans were made. Nothing would stand in the way of this monument of glory, even if raising the vertical radius of the new dome to 180 feet above ground was part of the revisions. These setbacks did not deter Justinian or the many laborers who strived to create what had not been attempted before. St. Sophia defied all the laws of physics, yet it still stands today. And yet, St. Sophia does not need applause, the achievement speaks for itself. St. Sophia is to Orthodoxy what the Parthenon is to Hellenism.

So many centuries later, the exterior is still muted and the thought of the vibrancy of Worship inspires. The Marmara is still well traveled and like so long ago, St. Sophia offers the most beautiful of views. The sun still rises and sets, illuminating the interior today for the pilgrim as it did during the glory of Byzantium.

St. Sophia is a gift from God to the world.

*Steven Papadatos is the founder of Papadatos Partnership LLP, a New York City based Architectural firm. Over 40 year career as a licensed architect in 14 states, he has designed and restored countless Byzantine houses of worship throughout the world.*

## Encounters Between Ecumenical Patriarchs and Popes: 1964 to 2006

- Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras meets with Pope Paul VI on the Mount of Olives on January 5 and 6 in 1964, in Jerusalem.
- Pope Paul VI visits Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Constantinople at the Phanar on July 25, 1967.
- Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras visits Pope Paul VI in Rome on October 28, 1967.
- Pope John Paul II visits Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I in Constantinople at the Phanar on November 30, 1979.
- Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I visits Pope John Paul II in Rome on December 7, 1987.
- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew visits Pope John Paul II in Rome on June 29, 1995.
- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew meets with Pope John Paul II at Assisi, Italy, on January 24, 2002, for a "Day of Prayer for Peace in the World."
- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope John Paul II issue a joint declaration on the protection of the creation simultaneously in Rome and in Venice, June 10, 2002.
- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew visits Pope John Paul II in Rome on June 29, 2004.
- Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew preside over an Ecumenical Celebration in Rome, at the Vatican Basilica, on November 27, 2004, on the occasion of the Return of the Relics of Sts. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom.
- Pope John Paul II passes away on April 2, 2005. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew personally attends his funeral at the Vatican on April 8, 2005.
- Pope Benedict XVI visits Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Constantinople at the Phanar on November 30, 2006.